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THE STORIES OF JAMES LANE ALLEN.

IF we recognize the generally accepted dictum that a man writes best what he has most keenly felt in life, we are led to believe that Mr. Allen must surely have drunk deeply of the sorrows of this earthly pilgrimage. He looks at life through glasses tinted with the dark hue of melancholy. He revels in the sorrowful tale, in the moroseness of the monastery, in the gloom of asceticism, in the poignant suffering of repentant devotees, in the pall of tragedy. I say this because I consider Mr. Allen's first book, "Flute and Violin," the best that has come from his pen. The stories are sad, but they are in a new vein of short-story writing, and the style belongs peculiarly to this author.

Again, if these stories are to be accounted in any sense representative of Kentucky life, there must surely walk a ghost of gloom and melancholy over the blue grass regions. One might expect to pass from the lively to the severe in the range of six Kentucky stories; but if one sits down to the perusal of this volume with such an idea and reads on to the end, growing more and more morose with each story, yet hoping to find one ray of the sunshine of joy and happiness ere he close the book, he will rise at last a sadder and a wiser man. The tone of the book from one end to the other is but a wail of sadness. The flute and the violin become the silent emblems of repentance for a sin of omission committed by the dreamy, saintlike parson in the one moment of elation which came into his mournful existence; we remove the white cowl but to uncover a story of a passionate outbreak against the unnatural law of restraint put upon man's natural tendencies by the monastic life; we must weep with "Sister Dolorosa" in the agony of her violated conscience, and weep for her when her frail form lies on the bleak shore of the Hawaiian Island where lived the lepers; we must contemplate the dreary prospect of consigning ourselves to forgetfulness in "Posthumous Fame;" we must associate with the direst misery in the person of

“King Solomon of Kentucky;” we must walk a desolate way with the “Two Gentlemen of Kentucky,” who are but the brown and sere relics of a past order clinging to the branch where a new and vigorous foliage is bursting around.

Of these stories, “Flute and Violin” is the best. There is something of a quiet humor in the first part which is contagious. The two old maids, one of whom enlarged the hole through which the latchstring passed in order to increase the ventilation of the parson’s room; and the other one, who was of the opinion that the window curtains of red calico should be taken down in order to increase the light in the same apartment are quite amusing. Who could repress a smile as he stands by these two, when they sit so solemnly with their heads together at the window of the room opposite the parson’s, and watch the old fellow in his one moment of foolish happiness, dressed in the ballroom costume of a Virginia gentleman of an earlier period, prancing up and down his room through the mazes of the minuet to the music of his own flute? The artistic touch of the poor little cripple’s hobbling up to the door of the house just at this point is excellent. He knocks and waits. He listens to the merry flute above, and presently he knocks again, though he is almost overcome with mortification at his own presumption.

“‘Hist!’ said the widow to him, in a half-tone, opening a narrow slit in the curtain. ‘What do you want, David?’

“The boy wheeled and looked up, his face at once crimson with shame. ‘I want to see the parson,’ he said, in a voice scarcely audible.

“‘The parson’s not at home,’ replied the widow sharply. ‘He’s out, studying up a sermon.’ And she closed the curtain.

“An expression of despair came into the boy’s face, and for a moment in physical weakness he sat down on the doorstep. He heard the notes of the flute in the room above; he knew that the parson *was* at home; but presently he got up and moved away.”

The pathos of this story would touch the coarsest heart. One thinks of the death of little Nell and of Paul Dombey when the end comes, and it were hard to say which of these scenes moves us most. This story made Mr. Allen's reputation, and it places him, beyond a doubt, high among our modern writers of short stories,

The one thing which lends a lasting charm to "A Kentucky Cardinal" is the intimate friendship of Adam Moss for his plants, his birds, and his dumb companions. His garden, with its strawberries and grapes and lilies and roses, with its background of cedars, the home and haunt of all his birds—the cardinals, the sparrows, the thrushes—is a delightful spot. The scenic arrangement of Georgiana's window just over his strawberry bed adds a picturesque romanticism to the love-making. It is not the love story, for at times this grows noisome—a fact which indicates the author's tendency to realism—but, as I have said, it is the intimate appreciation of nature which pleases us most in this little book. I quote a passage from Adam's diary:

March is a month when the needle of my nature dips toward the country. I am away greeting everything as it awakes out of winter's sleep, stretches arms upward and legs downward, and drinks goblet after goblet of young sunshine. . . . But most I love to see Nature do her spring house cleaning in Kentucky, with the rain clouds for her water buckets and the winds for her brooms. What an amount of cleaning she can do in a day! How she dashes pailful after pailful into every corner, till the whole earth is as clean as a new floor! Another day she attacks the piles of dead leaves, where they have lain since last October, and scatters them in a trice, so that every cranny may be sunned and aired. Or, grasping her long brooms by the handles, she will go into the woods and beat the icicles off the big trees as a housewife would brush down the cobwebs; so that the released limbs straighten up like a man who has gotten out of debt, and almost say to you joyfully: "Now, then, we are all right again!" This done, she begins to hang up soft new curtains at the forest windows, and to spread over her floor a new carpet of an emerald loveliness such as no mortal looms could ever have woven. And then, at last, she sends out her invitations through the South, and even to some tropical lands, for the birds to come and spend the summer in Kentucky. The invitations are sent out in March, and accepted in April and May, and by June her house is full of visitors.

It seems that our author could not be satisfied with the success attained by "A Kentucky Cardinal," both as a se-

rial in *Harper's Monthly* and as a holiday booklet, until he had explained how Adam and Georgiana "lived happy ever after." Perhaps he intended for them to live happy ever after, but when he dipped his pen to tell about it in "Aftermath," somehow the "Dark Fowler" came up from the marshes and got in his work. The story was not complete until death and sorrow had come.

Some years ago "John Gray" appeared as a complete novel in *Lippincott's Magazine*. The author was James Lane Allen, and the story no other than "The Choir Invisible." The first half of this book is almost identical with "John Gray; in fact, almost the only difference between the two books is that "The Choir Invisible" is expanded to about double the length of the other volume. I do not think that the author has treated the public fairly in changing the name of the revised work. While the conceit of the new title has caught the public ear—though perhaps not one in ten knows why it is called "The Choir Invisible"—the method of gaining popularity strikes one as cheap and unworthy of an author who has respect for his reputation and love for his art. Another provoking instance of this imposition is the changing of "Butterflies," as it appeared in *The Cosmopolitan*, into "Summer in Arcady," a title which one who had read the serial would not have suspected to cover the same story.

"John Gray" is drawn for a strong character. Mr. Allen has put his best efforts here and has given us just as much of virility and firmness and determination as he can conceive. He has painted him a young man with high ideals and with the determination to realize them, with high moral standards and the tenacity of purpose to uphold them; yet there are moments when even John Gray wavers, when he is a weakling, when he is not so sure that "he shall go on rearing the structure of his life, to the last detail, just as he has planned it." In my opinion this is true to life; for the strong man is not always strong and the weak man is not always weak. The best of us have at times played the fool and were perfectly conscious of it, and the weakest of us, in

however small a sphere, have at times played the part of a hero and knew it. Who can say that the strongest will not fall before the assault of the affections? Who can boast that he will never cringe nor yield nor fall before the wild rush of passion? The young schoolmaster was a man of strong passions as well as of strong will, and so when he found himself in love with Jessica Falconer the strong moral standards of his life were lifted aside and he wavered—yea, fell—though the final consummation of his evil purpose was deterred. The spectacle of a strong man riding all night on his journey, and then deliberately turning back and riding all day, is amusing, but those who have been through some such foolish antic know just what real tragedy is in it. This is true to life, but the question arises: Is it true to art? The situation has not completely demolished the ideal of strength which, up to this point, we have striven to form of the character of John Gray; for he did not complete the evil purpose for which he turned back. But what shall we say when the end comes and the woman he loves is free, and an engagement binds him to a woman whose family has befriended him, and when he tells her all, and goes a week later, and again a month later, and then marries the woman he did not love to settle down into the desperate calm of an unhappy mated existence, leaving another sad waiting heart to “tread her way softly all her days?” Does art require that the man should thus debase himself? Does any one think more of him for the high sense of honor he displayed in his loyalty to this woman who was willing to accept the little he could offer and wait to win the rest? There is no question that the denouement is weak. No one can say that it is impossible. In fact, it seems more than probable that just such a thing might have happened; but book characters are not, neither can be, real men and women, and their goings and comings are no more than the goings and comings of their creator’s imagination, and the question arises, would it not have been better to have married John Gray to his benefactor’s daughter before he learned that the one woman who could command the great

love of his soul was free? Is not all the strength of the character vitiated in this one weakness? Is not all his manhood and courage invalidated by this one cowardly act? For surely it is cowardice and weakness to marry a woman out of a sense of duty when one knows that love can never come. We can admire a man who makes the best of life when he sees that he has made a mistake, but there is nothing but contempt for one who deliberately spoils his own happiness and the happiness of two women by marrying one of them because of a sense of gratitude, or because of a mistaken sense of honor.

The heroine, Mrs. Falconer, is the best character in the book. We see her working away in her garden, bestowing the love of her woman's heart on her tender plants, because they at least return her attentions in affectionate silence, and we are drawn to her. We have the deepest sympathy for her when we learn that she is "the yearning image of native loneliness," and we wonder if in her younger days she had been duped into the belief that she loved Major Falconer, or whether she had accepted him as the part and portion of the male sex that fate had allotted her. At any rate, we accept her as she is, and feel for her in her longing for that companionship which mutual love alone can give in married life. She is an intellectual creature, and the author puts some of his brightest sayings in her mouth. Perhaps this, spoken to John concerning his marriage with Amy, is as good an example of Mr. Allen's cleverness as is to be found in the book: "You might remember this: some women in marrying demand all and give all: with good men they are happy; with base men they are the broken-hearted. Some demand everything and give little: with weak men they are tyrants; with strong men they are the divorced. Some demand little and give all: with congenial souls they are already in heaven; with uncongenial they are soon in their graves. Some give little and demand little: they are the heartless, and they bring neither the joy of life nor the peace of death."

If the author meant to make Amy Falconer a detestable

bit of clay, he has succeeded admirably. He says, "there was nothing very deep about her;" and we all agree, no doubt, on this point. The scene in which Amy and John are first brought together before the reader is as sickening and as absolutely silly as one could well imagine; and does not the author stoop to cheap methods when he puts a crumb in the corner of her mouth and makes her pick her teeth daintily with a pin?

The minor characters in the book are like most ordinary mortals, so insignificant that they make no impression. I think Mr. Allen lacks the power of portraying his characters in such a way as to make one see them walking and talking before one from the very moment they are introduced. He has not the gift of finding one word to tell you all. His characters come out slowly as from a chrysalis, and a haze of indistinctness envelops them to the very end. In fact, there is a rarefied atmosphere enveloping the story, which, even if at times it covers the characters as by a misty pall, has the effect of a soothing narcotic, if one will but yield to its influence. Yet, after all, there is something pleasant in vagaries, for life itself is a mystery.

The story is meager, though there are a number of dramatic situations. The chief interest centers, and properly so, around the characters. Sometimes one meets with felicitous expressions in the book that set one thinking. Such, for example, as "the yearning image of mated loneliness," "the masterful voices of boys at their games," "the forever filling, forever emptying honeycomb of self-love," "it was a day when the beauty of earth makes itself felt like ravishing music that has no sound," "that lone outpost of the alphabet," "a deep, voiceless, impassioned outcry."

The moral influence of the story is not quite what one could wish. Mrs. Falconer does not strike one as a bad woman in any sense, but there is something about her lack of love for her husband, something about the cold, calculating sense of duty which she shows toward him, something about the ease with which she accepts his death, something about the frozen silence concerning him in after years,

something in the prodigal way in which she spent money that Major Falconer had amassed, that smacks of disloyalty, of careless indifference, even of disrespect for one who has done what he could and lain down and died. But the moral influence of John Gray's immoral love for the wife of Major Falconer, and her seemingly unconscious return of this love, is the principal point of objection. The canons of art may demand the nude in sculpture and painting, and realism may demand the immoral and vulgar in literature, but the law of Christian conscience, which is above all other law, forever cries out against this harmful influence. The author must be held responsible for the moral influence of his books, and so Mr. Allen must be held responsible for the moral influence upon his readers of John Gray's immoral love for another man's wife. What good can such portrayals bring? Do not the healthier problems of a moral love offer just as good a field for artistic display as the debasing situation of the immoral passion? Is the world so wedded to immorality that a pure story is no longer to its taste? If such is the case, and if a certain class of latter-day novels is the reflection of the age in which we live, it is high time that we take the warning of the past and call a halt, for the history of the world emphatically teaches that immorality inevitably leads to destruction.

In passing I might add that the claim for popularity of "A Summer in Arcady" is based on the clandestine meetings of the young girl, Daphne, with her wild and headstrong lover, Hillary. The author calls this a story of nature, and he finds great pleasure in discovering and laying bare the animal passions and instincts of our natures. Again we ask, why could not Mr. Allen have given us a purer story of love, and made of his beautiful Arcady of Kentucky the idyllic home of these happily mated children of nature? But he is a realist in his stories, even though he be an idealist in his language, and he might not have been true to his art if he had given us a cleaner book. We are ready to agree that the story has been enacted over and over again in our very midst, still the wonder is that any author

should be willing to put his time and talents upon such carnal evidences of our human weaknesses when the world is so full of better themes.

To return to "The Choir Invisible." If we consider the book from a historical point of view, we may safely affirm that, as to the facts of the period of which it treats, they are accurate; and we might well place a high estimate on Mr. Allen's power to describe past events, to estimate historical values even. Witness the description of the battle of Blue Licks, the discussion of the political situation, the influence of beautiful, passionate France, the enthusiasm for Citizen Genet, the Jacobin clubs, the tricolored cockades, the vituperation of Washington in his steady course of neutrality. These and a hundred other points are strongly brought before us. But the atmosphere of the past is not in the book. One never spontaneously thinks of it as a historical romance. It is only when the author introduces some fact of history that we remember that we are reading about persons who lived in another period. The characters seem to belong to the latter years of the nineteenth century rather than to the latter years of the eighteenth. The art of the historical romancer is to keep his reader in the period of which he writes; to make him feel the history, fight the battles, hate the enemy, love the partisan; to make him forget that he lives in the present; to transport him to other times, so that when he lays aside the book to look around himself, he finds himself in the broad light of his own times as by a bound from the mysterious atmosphere of those gone days. Mr. Allen fails in this. He does not catch the spirit of the age, he does not transport one into the atmosphere of a hundred years ago; and, while his history is accurate, he has not breathed into his pages the breath of the past. Hence, as a historical romance, "The Choir Invisible" seems to be a failure.

But let us turn now to a consideration of Mr. Allen's style of composition, leaving aside, for the present, his creative ability. There is something in the flow of his words, something in the quality of his style, which charms. There

is nothing pedantic, nothing unmusical, nothing abrupt in all his pages, even if at times an effort for effect is noticeable in his word paintings. The prose rolls along almost with the rhythm of verse; in fact, the poetic element predominates. There is a wonderful wealth of exquisitely wrought imagery in his out-of-doors pictures. One would say that he excels in descriptions. He sees clearly and draws the outlines of his picture firmly, filling in the delicate smilax and mosses of detail with a skillful hand. The sunlight fairly dances over his landscapes. The many-peaked clouds become wandering Alps under his touch; the cold brook creeps over the gray-mossed rocks; nature walks abroad as if to salute some imperial presence; a hundred green boughs wave on every side; a hundred floating odors rise; the flash and rush of bright wings catch the eye; and all the sweet confusion of innumerable melodies soothe the tired mind. I know of no present-day writer who gets nearer to nature's heart than James Lane Allen. Love for nature is almost universal, and if a writer is in such intimate communion with our common mother as to be able to deliver some special message through his books, we are ever ready to welcome him as a friend.

Aside from this close communion with nature and this skillful manipulation of words in scene painting there is little to praise. There are two noticeable characteristics of Mr. Allen's stories: they either tend toward sadness, or toward immorality, or even vulgarity. The former, though unpleasant when pressed to excess, is not so much to be condemned; but there is no excuse for the latter, even behind what may be termed the author's art. Mr. Allen is not, in my judgment, a great writer. He is a disciple of Thomas Hardy, without the genius of the Englishman. But, after all, he is a modern novelist whose office is to please or to while away a vacant hour, and there are many who find genuine pleasure in his books, for they are light, and breezy with nature, and restful. He deserves credit, too, in that he has led the way into the pioneer history and customs and life of Kentucky. He has added his State to the meager

list of States which find themselves represented by a literature peculiar to themselves. He has put Kentucky alongside of Hawthorne's Massachusetts, Irving's New York, Page's Virginia, Cable's Louisiana, Craddock's Tennessee, and Harris's Georgia, though as to his relative rank in this list of authors I should place him last.

L. W. PAYNE, JR.